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Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

United Nations Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 70/171 and provides an overview of the activities of the United Nations Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region from August 2015 to July 2017. The report highlights the achievements of the Centre and provides an outline of the steps taken to strengthen its effectiveness and efficiency in responding to the increasing need and demand for support and technical assistance for the promotion of human rights in the countries covered by the Centre.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 70/171, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit at its seventy-second session a report on the implementation of the resolution. It provides an overview of the activities and achievements of the Centre from August 2015 to July 2017.

2. In February 2017, further to the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) issued in May 2016, the Centre initiated a participatory review of its activities and planning process.

II. Main results on key thematic priorities

3. The strategic priorities of the Centre align with the thematic areas of the Organizational Management Plan of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for 2014-2017:

(a) Widening the democratic space;

(b) Early warning and protection of human rights in situations of conflict, violence and insecurity;

(c) Strengthening international human rights mechanisms;

(d) Enhancing equality, countering discrimination, combating impunity and strengthening accountability and the rule of law;

(e) Integrating human rights in development and in the economic sphere.

4. From August 2015 to July 2017, the Centre played an important role in building the capacity of various actors, including Governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations and United Nations entities. In partnership with the OHCHR Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, the Centre also engaged in building the capacity of representatives and staff members of regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions.

5. During the reporting period, there was increased demand for training in relation to the international human rights mechanisms and the promotion and protection of human rights in conflict situations. As the human rights situations and circumstances differ in the 25 countries covered by the Centre, it adapted capacity-building activities to the various and evolving needs and challenges of the region.

A. Widening the democratic space

6. During the reporting period, the Centre played a critical role in providing civil society organizations and human rights defenders with the knowledge and skills necessary to defend and promote human rights. Its capacity-building activities for human rights defenders focused on women human rights defenders and journalists.

7. Since 2013, the Centre, in partnership with the OHCHR regional office in Beirut, has been undertaking a capacity-building programme for women human rights defenders, including four training sessions for 50 women from the Middle East and North Africa. In August 2017, the Centre will organize a capacity-building activity for 20 women human rights defenders.

8. General Assembly resolution 70/161 highlighted the vital work of human rights defenders in promoting, protecting and advocating the realization of economic, social and cultural rights. The Centre strengthened the capacity of human rights defenders in this area, following up on an initial training of trainers on economic, social and cultural rights organized in Doha in October 2015. The training targeted 18 human rights defenders, including 7 women, from nine countries across the Middle East and North Africa. The third phase of the programme will focus on documenting cases of violations of economic, social and cultural rights and will provide the participants with technical and substantive skills to train their colleagues on monitoring such rights and developing strategies to strengthen their work in this area.

9. The World Programme for Human Rights Education stresses the need to promote human rights training for media professionals and journalists. In this regard, and within its yearly celebration of World Press Freedom Day, the Centre, in cooperation with Al-Jazeera Public Liberties and Human Rights Centre and Al-Shuruq Centre for Media, Human Rights and Democracy in Morocco, organized a regional training workshop on a human rights-based approach to the media in Morocco in May 2016. The training was attended by 17 participants, including 5 women, from 10 different countries. The purpose was to enhance their knowledge of human rights standards and principles relating to media freedoms and develop their skills in applying a human rights-based approach to their work.

10. In celebration of World Press Freedom Day in 2017, and in partnership with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions and the UNESCO office for the Gulf States and Yemen, the Centre organized a seminar in Doha on the theme "Media's role in advancing peaceful, just and inclusive societies". The event focused mainly on combating hate speech in the media and on the role of journalists in promoting dialogue. It was attended by 50 journalists, including 20 women, and students from Qatar.

11. From 8 to 10 May 2017, in Khartoum, the Centre, in cooperation with the Al-Jazeera Public Liberties and Human Rights Centre and the General Union of Sudanese Journalists, organized a seminar and a training workshop on the theme "The role of the media in promoting peaceful communities and an inclusive platform: reality and challenges of protection efforts". The seminar was attended by 113 Sudanese participants, including 29 women. A key outcome of the seminar was the recognition of the importance of meaningful public participation in the drafting process of a new Sudanese media law. The workshop, for its part, was attended by 109 journalists, including 40 women, and aimed at enhancing their knowledge of human rights and international humanitarian law and standards and of the main international and regional human rights protection mechanisms.

12. Since 2011, the Centre has organized five regional consultations on formal human rights education at the primary, secondary and university levels, with a focus on both the Arab Plan for Human Rights Education (2009-2014) and the second and third phases of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2010-2014 and 2015-2019). On 13 and 14 September 2015, in Doha, the Centre organized a consultation workshop on formal and informal experiences in developing human rights education, which hosted nine experts from ministries of education and academic institutions in Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and the State of Palestine. The participants identified best practices and challenges in developing and implementing human rights education programmes at the formal and informal levels. Their main recommendations included the need to develop national plans aligned with recommendations by international and regional human rights mechanisms; the importance of partnerships between Governments and civil society

stakeholders; and the need to enhance the capacity of ministries of education in developing curriculums on human rights education.

13. The Centre has developed a coordination mechanism involving several regional and international organizations working on human rights education to strengthen cooperation and related capacity-building activities.

14. The Centre identified a major gap in human rights publications and documentation in Arabic, as well as in other languages spoken in countries covered by the Centre. Since its establishment, the Centre has focused on Arabic-speaking countries. It intends to invest greater efforts in reaching out to non-Arabic-speaking South-West Asian countries in the coming years. For instance, it will develop a web-based information management system to serve the region and provide accessible online human rights resources, including online training programmes targeting youth.

B. Early warning and protection of human rights in situations of conflict, violence and insecurity

15. The Human Rights Council, in its resolution 31/21, affirmed the importance of human rights education and training as a tool to help to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, racial and religious intolerance, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. During the reporting period, the Centre contributed to conflict prevention efforts in the region by focusing on the right to education in conflict situations and combating hate speech.

16. The four-year project on the protection of the right to education during insecurity and armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, implemented by the Centre in partnership with the Education Above All Foundation through its Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict programme, came to an end in December 2016. A formal report[1] was issued upon the completion of the project and is focused on children's rights to education in Egypt, Tunisia and the State of Palestine. The report also reflected the voices of the children and students who participated in the projects to learn about their rights as children, in particular their right to education.

17. Through the project, the Centre provided grants to two civil society organizations active in the Middle East and North Africa: Defence for Children International and the Teacher Creativity Centre. The purpose of the grants was to enhance the role of civil society in ensuring that the right to education was respected and protected in countries affected by conflict. Defence for Children International, through its Middle East and North Africa Desk, implemented a regional project to enhance the right of children to gain access to education in Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and the State of Palestine. The project benefited 306 children. The Teacher Creativity Centre implemented a project in the State of Palestine that trained 30 teachers and 30 youth activists on using human rights legal tools and mechanisms to promote the protection of their right to education and to document related violations. In turn, those teachers and activists conducted 118 educational sessions in their respective schools, which benefited a total of 1,050 students, including 560 female students. The students were able to document 56

[1] Courtney Erwin, "These are my rights: students from Palestine, Egypt and Tunisia speak out", study on the protection of the right to education during insecurity and armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa region, a joint project of the United Nations Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region and Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict, 2016.

complaints relating to the violation of their right to education and to submit them to relevant authorities. The aforementioned report highlighted the main achievements of the projects and the need for increased international efforts to promote the right to education in situations of conflict and insecurity.

18. In May 2016, in Doha, the Centre organized a meeting on the right to education in the context of insecurity and armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa involving 18 participants, including 13 women. These included the heads of Defence for Children International and the Teacher Creativity Centre, as well as independent experts in education and representatives of regional and national organizations. The Centre agreed with the Education Above All Foundation on the necessity of a new partnership to further promote the right to education.

19. In July 2016, the English version of the educational website www.protecteducationmena.org was launched by the Centre and the Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict programme of the Education Above All Foundation. The main purpose of the website, which was launched in Arabic in 2014, is to provide information on the protection of the right to education in the context of insecurity and armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa and on the work of the United Nations system organizations and the "Protect education in insecurity and conflict" project. The website also contains a library of relevant publications and resources on the right to education in times of conflict.

20. On 22 and 23 December 2015, in Doha, the Centre organized, in cooperation with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions, a seminar on ways to counter incitement and promote tolerance. The event was held in the framework of the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.[2] The 25 participants, including 6 women, from 11 Arab countries discussed the impact of hate speech on the enjoyment of human rights, as well as best practices in countering hate speech and promoting tolerance. The seminar concluded with three key recommendations: to establish independent civil society bodies to counter hate speech and incitement to hatred; to create departments within national human rights institutions specialized in analysing and documenting hate speech and to build the capacity to notify concerned authorities of such speech; and to carefully identify elements of academic curriculums that refer to incitement of hatred.

21. In July 2017, in Tunis, the Centre organized a regional workshop, in cooperation with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions, on the role of such institutions in the prevention of violent extremism. The event was attended by 30 participants, including 10 women, from 12 Arab countries. They discussed the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (see A/70/674) and identified key components of national plans of action to combat violence extremism.

22. On 20 and 21 February 2017, in Doha, OHCHR and the National Human Rights Committee of Qatar organized an international conference on human rights approaches to conflict situations in the Arab region in cooperation with the General Secretariat of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, the Arab Maghreb Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Parliament, the League of Arab States and the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions. The conference brought

[2] See www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/RabatPlanOfAction.aspx.

together more than 320 participants, including 73 women, and representatives of regional and international organizations.[3]

23. The conference participants reviewed the role of OHCHR in the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of ongoing developments in the Arab region. Participants also discussed ways to support and develop cooperation with international human rights bodies to follow up on the implementation of the universal periodic review recommendations. The conference further served as a platform for dialogue and information sharing on the roles, achievements and best practices among the various stakeholders. The participants called for further cooperation and coordination with national human rights institutions and civil society organizations to promote and support more effective interaction with national protection systems. They also stressed the role of OHCHR in enhancing the knowledge and skills of competent authorities and civil society actors on the use of international human rights standards and mechanisms.

C. Strengthening the effectiveness of international human rights mechanisms

24. The General Assembly, in its resolution 68/268, reaffirmed that the full and effective implementation of international human rights instruments by States parties was of major importance for the efforts of the United Nations to promote universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms and that the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system was indispensable for the full and effective implementation of such instruments. The Centre initiated a strategic engagement with relevant stakeholders to ensure the effective use of international human rights mechanisms and respect for human rights obligations under the human rights treaties.

25. In this context, OHCHR, in partnership with the National Human Rights Committee of Qatar, organized a regional conference on the role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the promotion and protection of human rights in the Arab region in Doha in January 2016. The conference brought together more than 250 participants, including 63 women, from national and regional organizations, including the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as well as national human rights institutions, civil society organizations and United Nations entities. The participants recognized the need for further cooperation and coordination between national human rights institutions and civil society organizations to promote and support States' effective interaction with national protection mechanisms. They also stressed the role of OHCHR in enhancing the knowledge and skills of the relevant authorities and civil society actors.

26. Recognizing the important role that diplomats can play in promoting compliance with international human rights standards, and in response to various requests received from Governments and diplomatic missions, since 2012 the Centre has implemented an annual capacity-building programme for diplomats. During the

[3] Other participants included the General Secretariat of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, representatives of the ministries of foreign affairs and justice in the Arab region, the Arab Parliament, human rights commissions and legal committees in the Arab parliaments and advisory councils, chairpersons of national human rights institutions in the region, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, representatives of civil society organizations in the region and non-governmental regional and international human rights institutions, as well as the heads of eight United Nations human rights offices, OHCHR officials and experts, and representatives of research centres.

reporting period, the Centre organized three training sessions for diplomats, including the fourth and fifth annual training workshops for Arab diplomats, in Doha in September 2015 and in Tunis in May 2016, respectively, and the first South-West Asian diplomats' training workshop on human rights and diplomacy, in Bangkok in October 2016. The workshops were attended by 53 participants, including 15 women, from 23 countries and provided them with the knowledge and skills to interact effectively with the United Nations human rights mechanisms.

27. From 27 February to 2 March 2017, in Geneva, OHCHR held a training session on human rights mechanisms for Arab diplomats. For the first time, the training included a visit to a session of the Human Rights Council and meetings with OHCHR staff members supporting various United Nations human rights mechanisms. It involved 22 diplomats, including 8 women, from four countries. The second training for Arab diplomats was conducted in Geneva from 12 to 15 June 2017, with participants from North Africa (6 women and 8 men). Two more training sessions are planned before the end of the year.

28. General Assembly, in its resolution 70/163, commended the support provided by OHCHR to national human rights institutions and encouraged the Office to continue such support. Providing technical support to national human rights institutions is among the main priorities of the Centre, which has been working in close partnership with the 12 accredited national human rights institutions in the region, as well as the Arab and Asia-Pacific networks of national human rights institutions.

29. In February 2017, the Centre signed a memorandum of understanding with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions to define the framework of the relation between the two parties and the roles and responsibilities of each. Taking into consideration the priorities of OHCHR in the region, the memorandum of understanding is focused on the following areas of cooperation in support of national human rights institutions in the Arab region:

(a) Developing the capacity and skills of their personnel;

(b) Raising awareness of human rights in the region and disseminating information with a view to promoting a human rights culture within the institutions and at the community level;

(c) Conducting training courses, workshops and conferences to contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights;

(d) Conducting joint research on human rights and related issues of mutual interest and concern and engaging in information sharing.

30. On 20 and 21 December 2015, in Doha, the Centre organized a regional workshop on the implementation of recommendations of the United Nations human rights mechanisms. The workshop focused on the role of national human rights institutions in interacting with the United Nations treaty bodies to enhance compliance with States' human rights obligations. It also provided the 20 participants, including 6 women, from 11 national human rights institutions with the knowledge and skills to effectively interact with the human rights mechanisms and to provide support to the States in fulfilling their reporting obligations, in partnership with civil society organizations.

31. On 12 and 13 March 2017, in Doha, OHCHR and the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions organized training on the United Nations human rights mechanisms and the role of OHCHR, building on the training for Arab diplomats. The training provided 13 participants from nine national human rights

institutions with the knowledge and skills needed to interact effectively with the mechanisms.

D. Enhancing equality, countering discrimination, combating impunity and strengthening accountability and the rule of law

32. In many countries covered by the Centre, discrimination against specific groups of people, including minorities, women and migrants, remains a major challenge. OHCHR is well placed to raise awareness of international standards on the elimination of all forms of discrimination, notably to strengthen the capacity of marginalized groups to enhance their access to justice, thereby supporting grass-roots and community-based organizations in ensuring the accountability of perpetrators of trafficking in persons.

33. Pursuant to the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 64/293, the Centre identified combating trafficking in persons in the region as one of its main priorities. On the basis of the extensive application of a human rights-based approach to the prevention of and fight against trafficking in persons, the Centre conducted eight capacity-building activities for law enforcement officers, legislators, officials from relevant ministries, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations.

34. In November 2015, in Dubai, the Centre organized a seminar on bridging the gap between national and international legislation on combating trafficking in persons in the Arab world, in cooperation with the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children. The objective was to identify gaps between national legislation and international standards regarding combating trafficking in persons, which participants emphasized the need to harmonize. A total of 25 participants, including 13 women, attended the seminar, including judges, lawyers and representatives of international civil society organizations and national human rights institutions.

35. In September 2016, in Amman, the Centre organized a regional training workshop on the role of national human rights institutions in combating trafficking in persons and in the protection of victims thereof. The event was attended by 20 participants, including 6 women, from 12 different national human rights institutions. Its purpose was to strengthen their skills in promoting and protecting the rights of trafficked persons and in identifying protection gaps. The workshop also addressed the impact of national, regional and international measures to combat trafficking in persons.

E. Integrating human rights in development and in the economic sphere

36. On 19 and 20 April, in Doha, the United Nations Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, in partnership with the Centre, organized the Asia Regional Forum on Business and Human Rights. The Forum attracted some 400 participants from 60 countries, including some 100 women, and discussed various critical issues, including the rights of migrant workers in the country of origin and destination, particularly the situation of female domestic workers; forced and child labour and trafficking in persons; access to remedy through judicial and non-judicial mechanisms; the situation of human rights defenders; the rights of women in a business context; and indigenous peoples' rights.

III. Strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of the Centre

37. Upon request by OHCHR, OIOS conducted an audit of the Centre from October 2015 to January 2016 to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of governance, risk management and control processes in providing reasonable assurance regarding the effective management of operations of the Centre. It covered the period from January 2013 to October 2015, focusing on strategic planning, performance monitoring and the regulatory framework.

38. The report of the audit was issued on 12 May 2016.[4] In response to the OIOS recommendations, the Centre has undergone a fundamental restructuring to ensure the effective management of its operations and to strengthen transparency and compliance with United Nations rules and regulations. Strict procedures are in place to safeguard adherence to the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations and the Field Administration Manual. The Centre has also taken on board the programmatic recommendations of OIOS. Most of the security requirements to comply with the United Nations minimum operating security standards will have been in place by the end of 2017.

IV. Conclusions

39. **The Centre has made noticeable progress in the promotion of human rights and advocacy in the region and will continue to strengthen its effectiveness and efficiency in responding to ongoing and emerging needs. On the basis of consultations held with stakeholders,[5] the Centre will also enhance its capacity-building and technical assistance, particularly in conflict and post-conflict countries. The Centre will also ensure that its strategy for 2018-2021 fully reflects its mandate and includes all the 25 countries under its coverage. The Centre will aim to strengthen its support to Governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, academics, regional organizations and United Nations entities.**

40. **To reinforce the three components of its mandate as set out in General Assembly resolution 60/153, the Centre will enhance its human rights education programme; further develop training programmes, with particular attention to national human rights institutions and civil society organizations; and continue to improve its documentation and public information services, including through a more accessible website and information system.**

41. **The Centre is fully committed to implementing the OIOS recommendations to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of its mandate.**

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[4] Report No. 2016/043. Available from https://oios.un.org/page?slug=report.

[5] In April 2017, the Centre conducted an online survey and in-depth interviews with key partners in the region, which underscored the important role that the Centre could play in addressing key human rights challenges in the region. The survey was completed by 81 professionals from 20 countries.